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Unwed Pregnancy and Adoption in Postwar Greece (1950–1983)

Eirini Papadaki

Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, more and more stories about reunions of adoptees with birth families in Greece are being made public via the media (mostly television). These stories have brought to the fore, for the first time, past violence that had been inflicted by the state, by close relatives, and by local communities upon poor unmarried mothers. This article focuses on the birthmothers' social and precarious economic position, the violence of the normative values of "honor and shame" and the total lack of state and affiliation networks to support these vulnerable women, whose only available legitimate choice was to relinquish their child for adoption. Years after they had relinquished their newborn children for adoption, and when attitudes within Greek society towards the status of women had changed, these birthmothers had found various ways to keep their memories alive and to claim their position as mothers of their relinquished infants.

Introduction

Four years ago, I visited my beloved 80-year-old aunt Tasia who was born in a village in central Greece and has been living in Athens for the last 60 years. After dinner, we sat down in her living room to watch her favorite Greek reality TV show, *Pame Paketo* (We Go Together Like a Package).¹ Over the past fifteen years, this show has featured, among other reunions, the reunion of birthmothers with the children they had to relinquish for adoption soon after birth. Central to each episode is a key date—the date of birth—when the lives and

destinies of the birthmother and the relinquished infant took an unexpected turn. The birth event is followed by an act of “abandonment” and, in most cases, an adoption process. The show fixes on the melodramatic moments of the reunion, backed by an equally melodramatic soundtrack that ends in “catharsis,” that is, in the revelation of the “truth” and the reconstruction of the previously lost genealogical history. My aunt was watching the show and crying; she then looked at me and said “I cry, my girl, because we know these things; for us, it is a common story.” As I started to do research on this “common story,” I was stuck by the frequency with which my interlocutors of postwar generations referred to stories of unmarried village women from poor families, many of whom had moved to the city to deliver and subsequently “give up” their infants. Everyone knew of an unwed aunt, cousin, or friend who had given birth to a child out of wedlock and had been forced to relinquish the child for adoption, and some variation of this common refrain is invariably uttered—“there was no other way back then.”

This article focuses on the social, cultural, political and economic circumstances in which unmarried women in postwar Greece relinquished their newborn children for adoption. I look at birthmothers’ precarious social and economic position, and the total lack of state and support networks to take care of these vulnerable women, who could only make “illegitimate” choices: raising an “illegitimate” child or having an illegal abortion. Social workers and close family members advised those women to make the “right” choice and relinquish the child for both the child’s and the birthmother’s “own good”. Children “born out of wedlock” in postwar Greece bore the stigma of their mothers’ “overt” sexuality, as a telltale symbol of their activities outside the accepted moral framework of marriage, and were characterized as “bastards” and officially called *notha* (νόθα, not authentic, illegitimate). It was only in 1983, with the reform of Greek family law, that the legal category of *notha* was abolished, so that children born “out of wedlock” were no longer considered “illegitimate.”² I

use the term birthmother, following anthropologist Judith Modell, who has studied birthmothers' narratives and their organized movement to change the laws about secrecy in adoption in the US, and their efforts to reunite with the children they relinquished and to find out what has happened to them, in order to elucidate the processes which birthmothers must undergo to retroactively claim their motherhood (1994: 61–62).

Drawing from twelve months research (October 2015–September 2016) in the Athens Association of Research and Data Disclosure of Adopted Children (SEASYP, Σύλλογος Έρευνας και Αποκάλυψης Στοιχείων Υιοθετημένων Παιδιών), and the relinquishing stories I heard there, this article investigates women's experiences of loss and longing, familiar and structural violence, stigma and shame. The article also critically analyses the utility of gender, kinship, honor and shame in postwar Greece for understanding women's predicaments and lived experiences. The stories presented here involve birthmothers who gave up their newborns at public institutions and whose identity, as a result, is known. Plenty of other adopted children do not have information about their birth parents in their adoption files, because they were registered as being of unknown parents, having been found in public places (for example, on the doorsteps of houses, churches, or hospitals or in baby boxes³ outside public nurseries). What follows is geared towards filling an important empirical gap since, with the exceptions of Aigli Brouskou's study (2015) and the ongoing work of Gonda Van Steen (2016), the existing scholarship on unwed pregnancy in postwar Greece is extremely scant.⁴

A useful concept to better understand the inequality and the consequences upon birthmothers is that of “stratified reproduction”, as introduced by Shelley Colen (1995) and elaborated further by Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1995) to depict “the power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered” (1995, 3). Thus, “experiences of reproduction are shaped by a variety of

cultural ideas and practises that are hierarchically organized according to normative categories” (1995, 13). In the Greek context, and for the postwar period till the beginning of the 1980s, those normative categories concerned the control of women’s sexuality and sex and pregnancy inside marriage. Class-based inequalities further defined these normative categories that, in turn, defined women’s situations. Poor, illiterate or semi-literate rural women, as well as those who were underage and without reproductive rights, that is, women who were generally found in hierarchically and stratified environments and move outside normative categories, are most of the time invisible, marginalized and powerless. Although the women presented in this article had been told to “forget” the incident and continue with their lives, they never did. Rather, they integrated the specificities of the birth and relinquishment into their everyday lives in a range of different ways. I argue that even if their “decision”—often forced—to relinquish their newborn child had been somewhat inevitable, owing to poverty or prevailing societal expectations, it was not triggered by their unwillingness to raise the child but their unequal position in the reproductive hierarchy (Colen 1995, 78).

Anthropologist Claudia Fonesca has been studying the contradictions between local concepts of parenthood and international adoption policies in Brazil for many years. Her work is part of a small sample of literature on adoption that addresses the birthmother’s perspective, highlighting the inequities that many women suffer on account of their class and economic status. The category of ‘birthmother,’ as she insightfully argues, is one that “has been constructed by others under the judgements of ‘unnatural,’ ‘irresponsible,’ or ‘shameful,’ [and] it is not easy to encounter people who volunteer information” (2011, 312). In my own research, I have often come across birthmothers who initially wanted to speak about this experience, but in the end declined doing so; some others wanted to speak to me only by phone and even those with whom I finally met with had difficulties finding their

voice to tell their story.⁵ If a local understanding of motherhood that gave special attention to birth, nurturing and upbringing—had once deprived them of their claim to their child, both legally and ethically, they sought to regain their lost status retroactively by finding ways to keep their experience of birth and loss alive, thus redefining the qualities that constitute motherhood.

The association

A scandal concerning illegal adoptions in the public nursery “Agios Stylianos” (Saint Stylianos) in Thessaloniki broke out in 1995. Specifically, it was revealed that hundreds of children during the 1960s who in the archives of the institution appeared as «έκθετα» (abandoned and of unknown parents) or even declared dead, had instead been given for adoption to American and Greek-American families. Birth parents were told that their children died at birth. The parents believed the doctors and didn’t ask to see the dead bodies since they were told that this was standard procedure, and subsequently left the hospital. After those revelations, a team of adult adoptees created the first association in 1996, «ΣΕΑΣΥΠ» (SEASYP) demanding the reform of the adoption law and the withdrawal of the article about secrecy, so as to entitle them to request information from their adoption archives. Their voice was heard, the law amended and the new law (Article 1559 of Law 2447/96) gave them access to the archives. Since then, adoptees (and not birth parents) have had the legal right to access such archives once they become adults.

The association, later called «ΣΕΑΣΥΠ Αθήνας» (SEASYP of Athens), had, by 2017, 2000 members. According to their memorandum, the “association was founded in response to the need of thousands of people, who were adopted during the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s, when economic and social conditions were challenging, to find their roots as well as the need

of natural parents to find their children,” and ensuring that adoption procedures and institutions are transparent.

Contrary to the Greek case where adoptees had started the procedure of opening the archives, in North America the demand came from birthmothers themselves (Modell 1994, Carp 2004), and this is an indicator of the shame and the difficulty of going public and narrating this kind of experience in Greece. The narratives of unwed pregnancy that Modell collected depicted how powerless and dependent on other people’s decisions those women were at the time of relinquishing their babies, as well as the conditions under which this relinquishing took place. North American women were victims of the sexual conservatism of the times and they had been pressed to give up their babies for adoption. Most of those women came from middle class, white families and were told to continue with their lives. Up to some point they did; many went to college and created new families, but eventually they understood the conditions under which this decision was taken and demanded justice. At “SEASYP of Athens” the vast majority of the cases involved birthmothers who did not have the opportunity, due to their level of literacy and social development, to find words or ways to claim their children.

For a year, I was a frequent visitor, and as I was not allowed to read the classified files, Mairy Selekou, the president of the association and my main contact, would read them out to me, replacing real names with pseudonyms. Since she knew these people—and had befriended many of them, she explained each case in detail. Among the files kept in the association, we disregarded the cases that had to do with fake births (εικονικές γεννήσεις)—a well-known illegal practice referring to births that are attributed to the adoptive mother in the registry office with the collaborations of midwives and doctors. In those cases, it is impossible to find evidence since the only people who know the truth are the adoptive parents, who in most cases did not disclose their family’s adoptive status to their children.

After many years some adopted adults found out the truth from a relative or from their own adoptive parents.

In the associations till September of 2016 there were 413 resolved cases (reunions); half of them were about unwed pregnancies. Almost all of the out of wedlock cases concerned poor women who relinquished their newborns and most of them were from rural Greece, who at the time of pregnancy lived in villages. Mairy selected carefully for me 20 cases, where she knew in person all the parties involved and had plenty of material to narrate to me; and I wrote down their stories in detail. Although she called many of them, five of them wanted to talk to me only on the phone, and I wrote down their stories in brief since both sides felt awkward discussing such intimate matters on the phone; only two agreed to meet me in their homes (one in a village and one in Athens) and in these cases we had an extensive interview with each. I had also interviewed and had multiple contacts with two other women friends of close relatives of mine who had relinquished their newborns and whose stories were very similar with those I have heard or interviewed through the association, but they did not want me to mention their stories in my work. Yet, it was those stories that gave me a more complete sense of unwed pregnancy in Greece in the postwar years. In this article I focus on two women to discuss the conditions of unwed pregnancy. I chose the story of Helen as I heard it from Mairy with whom she is very close friends now. Helen was underage at the time of pregnancy and her story depicts the extra violence that those women had gone through. And the story of Klio, one of the women I met with Mairy, whose story illustrates the feelings of loss and her effort to connect with the child she relinquished.

Ethics of procreation in “those years”

Most of the birthmothers that the association has reunited with their children had been raised in villages, but now live in Athens or in another large city of Greece. They had all moved to city to give birth, and most remained there to find a job; some managed to get married in faraway villages—few returned to their place of origin. Eventually they all got married. Hailing from poor families, they were either illiterate or had received elementary schooling. Most of them were in the village when they discovered their pregnancy and assessed their options against the backdrop of the moral codes prevailing in the village. The moral universe of reproduction, sexuality and gender within the Greek context, as documented by the ethnographers working in Greece during those decades—“those years,” as women often say—is central to the social framework within which the decision of a young, poor, semi-literate village woman to relinquish her out-of-wedlock newborn child must be understood.

The early ethnographers of Greece paid special attention to the “honor-shame” complex (Friedl 1962; Campbell 1964; du Boulay 1974, 1986, Hirschon 1978; Dubisch 1983). My interest here is not to discuss what their method might have neglected, but to recognize how established this discourse was in rural communities.⁶ According to those ethnographers, men and women’s sexual behavior affected the “honor” of the family and the village. John Campbell writes in his classic ethnography of the Sarakatsani nomads of northern Greece: “Maidens must be virgins, and even married women must remain virginal in thought and expression.... Her honor depends upon the reputation which the community is willing to concede...” (1964, 270). A woman’s honor was linked to how she regulated her sexuality and to the preservation of her virginity until her marriage. Women living in the countryside were expected to exercise control over their sexual behavior, contrary to men, who were deemed incapable of that (Du Boulay 1986; Hirschon 1978). While according to the widespread belief in Greece, male sexual urges were physiological, female sexuality was

capable of being restrained. Purity codes (Hirschon 1978), the identification of sex with reproduction and the idea that procreation legitimized female sexuality, were deeply internalized imperatives (Du Boulay 1986; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991b). They dominated discourses on acceptable forms of expression and embedded the sexual act within the strict social limits of marriage. It was by these rules that mothers, (and therefore the female self) were discursively “constructed.” Maternity restored female sexuality and accorded women the status of adulthood (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991b, 223). All these ethnographers argued that maternity transformed a “woman” into an “accomplished” and “ethical” subject and was in absolute accordance with Christian ethics, where the figure of Virgin Mary constituted the ethical maternal ideal.⁷

What was of great importance for the family and consequently for the whole community was that any misconduct that threatened the family’s honor and reputation had to remain a secret. Women “performed” their moral obligations by staying home, as they were not “allowed” to freely circulate in the village and in the public sphere that belonged to men (Hirschon 1978): being “out and about” was not only a threat to women’s purity and exposed them to various dangers, but also jeopardized the integrity of their whole society. A woman who observed the societal code of conduct was deemed “prudent” and unmarried women, for instance, did not engage in public displays of affection. Out-of-wedlock pregnancy could only be disclosed to members of the immediate family, and everybody had to work toward the restitution of the family honor. Failure of folk medicine to terminate an out-of-wedlock pregnancy led many to flee to the city to give birth and to leave the child there, in order to uphold the reputation and honor of the family and the community itself. Moreover, this proved that a woman, while susceptible to all these dangers, was also dangerous if she acted “sinfully” and was “self-indulgent.” Couples “who have sex without intending to marry were ‘like animals,’ unable to exercise their faculties of judgment and reasoning or control their

passions” (Iossifides 1991, 138).⁸ And yet, the consequences of sexual relationships were exclusively borne by women.

Campbell writes that “ideally, a girl who has a premarital love affair should be killed.” But, he himself leaves open the possibility of restoring honor since he writes that men often did not have “the courage to do it” and they resorted to rescue tactics such as persuading others that the woman had been “raped [rather] than seduced.” He continues:

But where the fate of the mother may hang in the balance, that of the illegitimate child is never in doubt. It cannot be allowed to live in the community, a testimony to the dishonour of the girl's family. It is placed on a mule-path where it may perhaps be found by others and delivered to an orphanage before it dies. No trace of pity is felt for the infant, for it is a thing without honour and therefore scarcely to be considered human at all. (1964, 187)

As to whether Campbell may have actually witnessed an honor crime, or if he was simply describing the normative discourse of the community is not clear.

Campbell mentions an honor crime that had occurred some years prior to his fieldwork, wherein a young woman and the villager who had impregnated her had been killed by her father to restore his own honor and that of his family (1964, 200). All these discourses on births out of wedlock are composed of official reproductive discourses in agricultural societies, illustrating the sensibilities of the time and the consequences of illegitimacy. However, the concept and content of honor bears upon a wide range of readings. When discussing a “crime of honor” committed in Mesi Mani several years before her research, Seremetakis (1991) realized that the families involved presented different justifications for the murder: men described it as an honor crime, while women implied that financial issues were the main motivation for the murder.⁹

What is mainly of interest here though, is not a quest for the motives of the actions in defense of honor, but the dynamics of the established norms in the respective actions and

discourses in postwar Greece. Opposing discourses on the murder, as exemplified by Seremetakis, were also presented at court trials of “crimes of honor” during the 1950s and the 1960s in Efi Avdela’s (2006) study. The offenders would declare the deed as a crime of honor, as if that was a legitimate justification. Witness testimonies seemed to “acknowledge the traumatic character of shame, as it is felt by a man regarding the disrespectful behavior of a female member of his close family, which directly afflicts his own reputation” (2006, 125). Although the code of “honor and shame” was a highly recognizable system of arrangement and actions underpinning the violent corrective measures taken for the restoration of lost honor, this symbolic system, as Avdela shows, was gradually losing ground from the mid-1950s onwards. It continued to be a highly recognizable system, however, with restrictions that sought to keep reproduction within the institution of marriage and “protected” women from “damage.”¹

Up until the early 1990s, Greek ethnography had not documented any incidents of births out of wedlock, and “ethnographers did not document even isolated cases of illegitimate children” (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991a, 7). Mothers and children born out of wedlock were invisible. The only ethnographic remark made was by Marie-Elisabeth Handman. During her research on the civil status record of a village in Pelion during the 1970s, she found out that eight children had been born out of wedlock during the 1930s: two had been instantly killed after birth, two were taken to an orphanage in a nearby city, two were eventually accepted by the birthmother’s husband, and the remaining two babies were taken away by their single mothers who fled to the city (1987, 129). She also discovered that two young single women who were pregnant had committed suicide in 1961 and 1968 respectively, “in order to get away from dishonor and paternal punishment” (129). Pothiti Hantzaroula in her study on female domestic workers born between 1906 and 1930 in various

places around Greece, but working in Athens, uses oral testimonies to show how these women embodied these codes and how not obeying the honor code “threatened the survival of the whole family and the reproduction of the whole community” (2012, 501–502). “The loss of honor meant the end of a woman’s life, as it entailed her exclusion from community life and from every form of sociality, from the potential of marriage and hence the possibility of fulfilling the only adult female role recognized in society, that is maternity” (2012, 502). Sexual attack and rape “were construed as an experience that caused shame, as it embarrassed the family’s reputation and honor” and was related to guilt, as “the women who were subjected to a sexual attack would place the blame on themselves...” (2012, 504).

Unwed mother’s footprints

In February of 1965, the newspaper *Eleftheria* reported:

A terrified woman shows up at the registry office. She seems reluctant, and then she decides. [...] Her declaration feels more like a confession of “shame.” This is how the tragedy of an illegitimate child begins [...]. The family feels “disgraced.” Relatives express their “discomfort” [...]. We all know the consequences [...]. For mothers, there is persecution, flagellation, even “lynching.” For children, there is contempt and hate. In certain cases, there are also murders. All parties involved strive for the same thing: to find a form of exile through which to hide the “disgrace” from public view forever [...]. (Papadimitriou 1965)

In her study back in 1970s, Kaloutsi-Tavlaridou, a Greek psychologist¹⁰ argued that in most cases, adoptive parents in Greece see the birthmother as “a threatening, mean and dangerous being ... [a]n irresponsible, immoral, inferior person” (1970, 56), or described her as “that beast,” “slut,” “lunatic,” even though they have never met her in most cases. Social

workers, Triseliotis and Kousidou, acknowledged that during the first three postwar decades, Greek society “was governed by prejudice against single mothers and the children born out of wedlock, while the powerful fear of ‘bad’ heredity was dominant” (1989, 233). Given the power of these representations of single birthmothers, one can understand how unthinkable it was for a woman, especially for poor and illiterate women, to raise a child out of wedlock.

After the National Statistical Service of Greece was reconstituted in 1956, some data on the physical movement of the population in the postwar period emerged. From 1956 to 1983,¹¹ the documented children born out of wedlock were estimated at 1,650 to 2,350 annually and the respective births were estimated at 1 to 1.5% of all births, a relatively low percentage compared to other European countries. However, according to Valaoras, the accuracy of these numbers is questionable, since “in violation of the laws in force, a lot of births out of wedlock are not declared (for *understandable* reasons) to the state registries” (1980, 39, emphasis mine).¹² It is also important to note that in many distant parts of Greece births in general were not officially recorded.

Statistical data, though, do not offer a comprehensive account of what has happened with the lives of these “relinquished” children, that is how many of those children were raised by their single mothers, how many of them were raised in different contexts, and in what ways they were transferred to other environments. In any case, during all these years, the Public Nursery of Athens, the public infant center “Mitera” (Mother) and the nursery of “Agios Stylianos” (the three institutions in Greece that accepted newborns) were filled with children, most born out of wedlock.¹³ “Not natural children,” as children out of wedlock were called, were by law related only to the relatives of their mothers, even if their father had recognized them. In addition, the unwed mother was given legal custody only by court decision because, according to the law of the time, “only the child who had been born in marriage is said to be ‘legitimate’” (Paxson 2004, 43). As Paxson notes, “a woman’s social

value and moral virtue has thus depended on wedded motherhood, women's properly realized nature, or what du Boulay (1974, 1986) calls women's destiny" (2004, 43). Whatever lay outside of this imaginary fate led to traumas that remained hidden and unvoiced.

The illegitimacy of choices

Although abortion in Greece constituted felony up until 1986, it was a widespread practice, which was "costly and hazardous" (Dhini 1986, 10) and performed illegally at private clinics in various cities at a high cost¹⁴ —and in high numbers, from 100,000 to 300,000 (Skoupa 1979, 25–34). In 1979, an abortion cost 5,000 to 15,000 drachmas, while the monthly wage of a newly hired teacher was 1,800 drachmas. "Well-performed abortions," as Tsouderou notes in a legislative discussion at the Parliament in 1979 "are a privilege of financially secure people. Weaker classes end up using methods that have really frightful consequences for women's health" (Skoupa 1979, 27). It is worth mentioning that during that period, many poor married couples living in the countryside or even in the cities would give their children to institutions or to wealthy couples for adoption,¹⁵ or at least attempt to do so. This was either because they had failed to perform an abortion or had not even tried to perform one, as it contradicted their Christian values (Avdela 2006), or they lacked the financial means or the social networks to do so.

Both the press at that time and women's narratives mention cases where abortions were attempted by people with little knowledge of "practical medicine," by midwives with inadequate equipment, or even by relatives, mostly the women's mothers (see also Paxson 2004, 45). In her short story collection *Mother*, based on narratives she had heard at the village in Peloponnesus where she had grown up, Maria Aliferopoulou-Halvatzi narrates the story of Fragoulena who attempted to perform an abortion on her single daughter Krinio and

undo the “misfortune that had found her” [το κακό που τη βρήκε] (2003, 51). In agitated calmness, she boiled thick wire strips and pushed them into her daughter’s vagina, who was crying in unbearable pain, and started twisting them inside. “It’s OK, Krinio” she said after a few minutes, “it fell off” [έπεσε], but then the girl started bleeding incessantly. “She cut a towel into strips. She opened her daughter’s legs wide and pushed the towel inside with her fingers.... The bleeding gradually stopped,” Krinio, was pale, and had lost consciousness, but she was alive (90–91). The violence inflicted by this procedure upon single mothers, is further highlighted below by one case Brouskou read in St. Stylianos nursery house:

A 16-year-old girl gets pregnant “by a married man.” At some point, her father notices her pregnancy and batters her, aiming to induce a miscarriage (the girl is in the sixth month of pregnancy). When she starts bleeding, he takes her to a gynecologist, asking him to finish off his work. The gynecologist (who does not inform the police of the incident) performs a caesarean section on the girl. It turned out that she was expecting twins and one of the fetuses was killed during the battering.... This is a very powerful example of the exceptionally violent conditions under which many illegitimate children must have been born. (2015, 197–198).

Many of these abortion attempts did not successfully terminate the pregnancy. Sometimes it was not an option, owing to the delay of especially very young women in realizing that they were pregnant, by which time the only option was to prepare to give birth.

In 1980, Areti Athanasiou, a journalist writing for the left-wing newspaper “Rizospastis,” referred to the “dramatic social and familial problem” posed by “the children born out of wedlock.” According to her research, only few women dare to oppose the legal and social norms in an attempt to keep their children. In 1977, for example, “Mitera” accommodated 170 unmarried mothers, most of whom eventually relinquished their child for

adoption.¹⁶ From the early 1960s until the late 1980s, children born out of wedlock were the most frequent residents of nurseries.¹⁷ Brouskou found that a lot of unmarried mothers explained their situation as having resulted from being abandoned and deceived by some “fiancé” and having to face financial hardships, thus legitimizing the child’s existence within the prevalent moral framework but also justifying the subsequent relinquishment of the child (2015, 196). The reasons for this “abandonment” cited by single mothers and the employees’ agreement to document this reason point to the fact that, since the early 1960s, single mothers have been granted moral legitimization and understanding in regard to their act of “abandonment.”

Despite the fact that these women did not manage to demand their rights due to financial and social reasons, society as a whole was not that impervious to change. Certainly, the working class and the poor faced greater difficulties in overcoming ethical imperatives, yet many things gradually started changing. Although very little is known about the history of the working class in the postwar decades, and especially about the existential precarity of the poor, Avdela’s studies (2013a, 2013b) present glimpses of juvenile delinquents based on the reports written by their female juvenile probation officers, often social workers. Those working with minors highlighted the severe poverty of the families they visited. At the same time, great numbers of people moved from the villages to bigger cities in order to find employment. Despite the difficulties faced by the moving populations, despite poverty and inadequate infrastructure, the unemployment and insecurity prevailing during that period, the movement itself “disturbed” some deeply rooted norms pertaining to relatedness. It partly transformed “traditional” ways of men and women being together or, rather, a new iconography of imagined gendered sociality gradually emerged. Women who arrived in cities in search of employment and left the wider family network in the provinces where they had been raised began to live on their own, actually reconfiguring the modes of partnership. As

Avdela puts it, the neighborhood and the yard replaced the mothers, the sisters, and the kinship networks, which demonstrated greater tolerance among the city dwellers in Greece for co-habitation, and for raising a child out of marriage (Avdela 2006, 141–142). But those transforming ways of being together did not seem to have the same impact of women living in rural areas, as their words through ethnographies of the time and through the stories I collected from the association have shown.

Birthmothers' experiences

We saw how hegemonic representations depicted the women who, for various reasons, had given up their newborn children for adoption. We also saw how their social positions defined their decisions and their choices. I now turn to a more detailed look at their own experiences and how they dealt with the fact of losing their child and how they tried after many years to articulate a 'lost motherhood' discourse that would put them in the position of claiming their motherhood status. Mairy told me that when many birthmothers were found and contacted by the association, they revealed that they had not spoken about their experience yet to anyone and were afraid to do so. After a few days most of them called the association back to say that they were ready to speak now, and they wanted to meet their child. The association offered these mothers a way to rethink their experience and to reclaim their position. 'It is not easy,' Mairy told me. 'In those days people thought these women were really bad,' as though they had committed the most abominable/atrocious act on earth. They were so stigmatized that it was impossible for them to articulate their experience (see also Fonseca 2011). Most of the women did not talk about this experience but that does not mean they had forgotten it, since most of them accepted the invitation to reunite on behalf of the children they had relinquished and had even tried to reconstitute this experience. In various ways these women

had tried to keep the memory of their child alive; either by secretly keeping a photograph of the newborn child or speaking about this experience to close friends and family if they had the courage to do so; or transferring their property to their children after their death.

The last is exemplified by a story I heard from Mairy. She told me that one day a very well-dressed and polite lady around 70 years of age came to the “SEASYP of Athens” office. Although the door was open, she did not come inside, but said to Mairy: ‘This is my name. Forty years ago, I gave birth to a girl and immediately gave her up for adoption. I was a prostitute then. A few years later I got married and lived another life and had a decent job. My husband, who gave me a comfortable and prosperous life, has died. I don’t have other children and I want you to find the child I gave up and give her my will. All my fortune will be transferred to my child after my death. I don’t want to meet her, and I don’t want anyone to judge me. I have paid the price for what I have done.’ Mairy found the child, who accepted the inheritance graciously and wanted to meet her birthmother. The mother refused and sent a message to her daughter through Mairy: ‘I am happy you accept the bequest. In all my years of marriage I have bought houses for you. You were always on my mind and I don’t want to destroy the magic.’

In November of 2016, I would finally meet a woman about whom I had heard so much from Mairy. Klio, in her early eighties, lived alone in a village in north Peloponnesus; her husband, with whom she had three children, had died five years ago. Mairy had reunited Klio with her first son days after her husband’s death. Mairy and I went to her house in a village 150 km away from Athens. After offering us spinach and orange pie which she had prepared for us, we started talking about her experience of finding her “lost” son. She was talking at a slow pace, in a gentle manner, and her voice bore traces of sorrow. “My story is simple,” she said, “as are hundreds of others.” In 1952, when she was living in a village in the highlands she started an affair with a young man from the same village. She was 17 when

she realized she was pregnant. When she informed her boyfriend, he disappeared. “He didn’t take any responsibility.” She added:

How can I make you to understand what it meant to be a woman back then? I had disgraced my parents, my brothers, all my kin, and suddenly they all despised me. I went to Athens before my pregnancy became visible and I gave birth to my child. I didn’t want to give him up, but my family insisted I give him up, didn’t allow me to raise a bastard, which was difficult back then.

The feeling of a pregnant woman being scorned by her family emerges in every narrative and every story I heard at the association. Even where a family member showed some compassion and empathy to the woman, they refused to support her in keeping the baby. Rather, they “assisted” these women to maneuver a miscarriage, either through improvised surgical operations at home, or through an intake of herbal cocktails aimed at miscarriage. For all those years, Klio wanted to talk to her children about her son, but her husband, who knew this story (as Klio informed me), did not allow it, which caused her much pain and grief over the years. After his death, she received a phone call from Mairy who informed her that the child she had given birth to years ago wanted to meet her. Klio told her, “Tomorrow I will call my three children and I will tell them the truth. If they get angry and upset and want to kick me out I will go. This child must be exonerated. He must meet me and I must tell him the truth. I cannot hold this a secret anymore.”

If we wish to understand why people conceal a certain kind of information, it is essential to view the secrecy in relation to the historical context and, in this case (as with many others), the woman’s life trajectory and reproductive history (Smart 2009, 556). The moment these secrets are disclosed is also a cultural moment that allows the revelation to become relevant to the current legal, social and cultural framework, rather than merely fester within the realm of personal ethics. Klio said: “And now I’ve found him... now I can die.”

“Look at him,” she says to me, as she shows me a wooden buffet full of family photos on it: “There, you see all my kids now, and the missing photo of my lost son. He is where he belongs.” And finally, the other children were very happy to meet their eldest brother. And, at some point, her daughter came in and joined the conversation, saying, “She should have told us... Why did she allow herself to go through that kind of pain? She always had him on her mind.” “Yes,” Klio said,

I was always in some kind of connection with him, you know. I kept having the same dream for years. In this dream, I was on a beach, swimming; there were small rocks and some people at the beach and while I was swimming, I suddenly realized that I didn’t know how I had come here, and I panicked, asking, “Where am I?” I couldn’t recognize that place and I asked “Why am I here? I don’t know anyone, and this place is totally unfamiliar” and then I would wake up. When I found my dear Kostis and he came here with his wife, they showed me a video featuring the place where he grew up in Paros. They showed me the beach that I kept seeing in my dream for years. As I recall it now, I get goose bumps. In my dream, I kept seeing the rocky beach near the house where Kostis grew up. And this place was in my dream.

In Greece, it is common practice for people to discuss and analyze dreams (Stewart 1997, 28) as a way to confront and deal with difficult situations. Elisabeth Kirtsoglou points out that dream narratives are “sites of creativity and agency”; she uses dream narratives to show how dreams “are [a] means of making sense of the world in a relational and intersubjective manner” (2010, 322). Klio’s dream is an effort to narrate her secret kinship, to give meaning to this unspeakable secrecy and give words to the agony of not being able to imagine her child’s destiny. For many years, she was unable to understand and give meaning to this dream, to this unknown place where she found herself swimming. After finding her son, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. This was the place where her son had grown up and it was at that moment that she finally connected her dream with her whole life, with

all her children. Klio had been trying to overcome the void that she had endured for years with the loss of Kostis. In this case, she only had a dream, which she employed to form a continuous connection, as continuity constitutes a legitimizing factor for kinship. In Klio's universe, that dream was a metaphysical proof that she had always been close to him, as his mother. She had found a way to connect with him and keep the lines of connection open for all those years that they had been ripped apart.

In their initial contact with the members of the association, a lot of birthmothers used stereotypical expressions for their decisions to give up their children for adoption such as "I gave it up so she could have a better life, not be a bastard" or "I did it for the child's own good." Greek ethnography has shown how "pain" and "sacrifice" are basic qualities of motherhood (Papataxiarchis 1998, 84). This particular sacrifice, to surrender your child, seems to be the most extreme sacrifice a woman can make, and it is this discourse of sacrifice that restores some of them as mothers. Women in Greece have developed the rhetoric of self-sacrifice to a great extent (see Dubisch 1995), and the concept of sacrifice is embodied in the poetics of femininity. Social expressions of suffering often carry with them verbal inevitable statements—for example, "What else could I do?" about the unwanted situations these women found themselves in and how they justified their actions. Studying motherhood over three generations, Paxson (2004) stressed that such expressions are not fatalistic but expressions that allow people to negotiate their choices without disturbing the dominant cultural norms (95).

Underage women who "lost" their child because their relatives had signed off on the adoption felt a greater degree of anger and injustice compared to adult women who seemed remarkably stoic. Some underage women had not only refused to give consent, they had also suffered physical and emotional violence, as they were quite vulnerable and dependent on their family of origin. One of the most moving stories I heard at the association is the story of

Helen, to whom Mairy is quite close, as she reunited her with her daughter ten years ago and since then their friendship has grown. In 1972, Helen, at the age of sixteen, lived in a city in central Greece, where after school she helped her family out with their agricultural jobs. Soon after, she started a relationship with a boy of her own age from the village and realized she was pregnant. Once her family learned about her pregnancy they beat her up severely. Her boyfriend visited the family and asked to marry Helen, but her brothers beat him up and forced him out of the house because he was also underage and poor. After this, her life turned into “a living hell.” She was repeatedly beaten, forced to lift heavy weights and drink various infusions that would result in miscarriage. Despite their attempts, she would not miscarry and was subsequently taken to Athens, to the house of a doctor from the same village, who agreed to accommodate her in exchange for doing the housework. When she was about to give birth, the doctor took her to a private clinic, which Helen insisted that she could not afford, asking, instead, to be taken to a public hospital. Everyone tried to reassure her, and the clinic obstetrician remarked: “Don’t worry, girl, we know you can’t afford it but you won’t have to pay.” Within a few hours, Helen had given birth to a healthy girl, and as soon as she returned to her ward, she saw a woman waiting for her with her husband. She already knew this woman—she had met her at the doctor’s house, as a friend of his family. The couple suggested that they adopt the child and buy her an apartment and a car to help her make ends meet. Helen got angry, refused their proposal and started crying “I’m not giving the baby away, I’m not!”

She stayed at the clinic for two days, where she was urged by everyone to give the child for adoption. Her sister, her mother, and her brothers kept insisting: “Give it away, what are you going to do with an illegitimate child? Where are you going to live?” However, Helen remained adamant about her decision. The gynecologist changed his stance and demanded that he be paid 10,000 drachmas for the birth. She told him that she did not have

this amount of money, but she would work and pay him and eventually keep the child. So she took the child to a nursery in Athens where she would be housed until she could make enough money to pay the doctor and find a house to stay. She noticed that her sister, who had accompanied her to the nursery, was wearing a new skirt and holding a nice leather purse. When she left the infant at the nursery, she declared that she was not relinquishing her child, and only needed a few days to find a job. For the next days, she would visit the nursery every day and breastfeed the infant, until one day, she was not allowed to enter the nursery. She made a fuss demanding to talk to whoever was in charge, only to be told that her child was no longer there, as she had been given up for adoption. As Helen was underage back then, her family and relatives had custody over the child, and her mother had given her written consent for the adoption. Years passed, and Helen got married and had another daughter, who had known about her “lost” sister ever since she was a young girl. As soon as Helen heard about the association, she went there to ask them to look for her first daughter. Indeed, Mairy found the girl and called her on the phone. She met with Helen, with whom she has developed a very nice relationship over the years. “Can you believe this?” explains Mairy. “They took her child away for a skirt and a purse!”

Helen has claimed her position as a mother in a powerful way. Like other women of whose stories I have heard, especially those of underage women, Helen felt that her child had been stolen from her and sought vindication; she never forgot and never shied away from being heard. Being underage made it difficult, even impossible, for Helen and other women to decide on their own. Telling the story of loss and searching for their child has made women like Helen visible as mothers. Even if they had lost their child, they had not lost their memories (Modell 1994, 64). Helen tried to reintegrate the relinquished child into her kinship network, even if other relatives had never met her.

Single mothers were offered limited options. Domestic servants would lose their jobs as single mothers, while they could not afford to hire a babysitter on a worker's wage. The only institution that could help them was "Mitera," an infant nursery where single mothers were offered special care services until the junta took over in 1967 and these services were abolished. Single mothers faced practical difficulties in cities; they struggled to survive. Separating mothers from their infants resulted in severe pain, and these women would often come to the institution looking for their children. However, the existing law still does not offer the birthmother access to archives; access is actually allowed only to the children, as soon as they come of age. Tasoula Kousidou, a social worker, who had worked as a supervisor at the infant nursery "Mitera," reports the pressure placed on employees by birthmothers who had given up their child for adoption some decades ago. As she claims: "The problem has assumed such dimensions that it cannot be ignored" (2000, 48). Moreover, psychologists from the same institution reported that according to the women themselves, "the feeling of loss is so enduring that, as with some of these mothers, not only does it not weaken, but it seems to get stronger at certain junctures (on birthdays and name days, for example)" (Polomarakaki 2000, 53). The fact that the birthmothers were asking for information and were clearly living in agony over the fate of their children did not go unnoticed by the staff of the nursery.

Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed the narratives generated by and about unwed birthmothers who had been forced by circumstance to give up their newborn children for adoption in postwar Greece. Most of the birthmothers in the records of the association were poor, illiterate or semilliterate, and faced extreme difficulty in complying with the ideological and material

requirements of their gender. Ethically, it was not easy to claim motherhood owing to legal and financial restrictions (especially among underage women). The inability to speak up and talk about this experience had a lot to do with the shame associated with it. But it was also owed to the lack of knowledge regarding possible avenues or courses of action and justifications, as well as lack of discursive scripts within which to narrate a story like this. Their drama was not only the decision they had to make, but also that all the other choices they were supposed to have were “illegitimate”: it was a choice between abortion and raising a bastard child. These women suffered violence in many different ways; some of them were beaten or had been subjected to home remedies and painful procedures to induce a miscarriage. They had lived their entire life suspended between hope and fear, love and violence. The stories they narrate, even with difficulty, produce kinship as they claim back their motherhood, filling the missing scenes owing to the surrender and loss of their child. Although the narratives hark back to times past, their constitution in the present offers useful comparisons with today’s birthmothers who relinquish their newborn children for adoption. It also underscores the fact that the normative characteristics ascribed to mothers and motherhood in general, or to specific, identifiable groups of mothers at each historical moment, change over time. Even if unmarried women and births out of wedlock no longer invite the same responses in Greece as in the postwar decades, today it is the migrant mother “without papers” who remains “outside the law” and who represents “illegitimacy,” is considered “undisciplined,” and rendered the outcast¹⁸ In other words, these are the women who cannot or do not subscribe to the prevalent maternal script.

NOTES

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¹ “Pame Paketo” is an expression that implies that we belong together.

² The reform of the 1983 family law abolished a series of provisions. The legal concept of “paternal authority” was replaced with “parental responsibility,” motherhood was equated with fatherhood, abortion was legalized, the legal category of “bastard” was abolished and there was legal equality of children inside and outside marriage, common marital property ownership was institutionalized, and the institution of dowry was disestablished.

³ For a more detailed account on the uses of baby boxes see Brouskou 2000.

⁴ For 19th century studies on foundling homes in Greece, see Thomas Gallant (1991) and Pelagia Marketou (1999). For historical analyses on unwed pregnancy in the United States, see Morton (1993); Fessler (2006); Solinger (2000); Kunzel (1993); and Gordon (2007).

⁵ For birthmother perspectives, see Modell (1994); Kendall (2005); Hogbacka (2016); and Fonseca (2011).

⁶ For a critique on the analysis of Mediterranean societies through the lens of honor and shame, see Herzfeld (1980). See also Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991a). For the ways in which women’s purity is discussed in agricultural Greece after the war, see Herzfeld (1983).

⁷ For the anthropological literature on motherhood in contemporary Greece, see Kantsa (2013).

⁸ See Halkias (2004) on contemporary Greece, who talks about women as “oxen,” going through an unscheduled pregnancy leading to abortion. Women who cannot control their sexual activities are still perceived as animals in many occasions.

⁹ For the murder of Vangelio, see Seremetaki (1991, 144-158).

¹⁰ The study of Kaloutsi-Tavlaridou is based on a hundred cases of adoption, out of which fifty cases were from Greece and fifty cases had to do with children who were adopted in the U.S from Greece. It should be noted that Kaloutsi-Tavlaridou highlights the fact that her data sample was based on “problematic situations” through a public institution where she was working at that time (1970, 48), but still give us a trend for the general perceptions.

¹¹ From 1956 till 1981 the percentage of children born out of wedlock lay ranged from 1.14 to 1.51% (Valaoras 1980).

¹² The question of birth and death registrations is exceptionally interesting, as there has been an attempt to initiate processes of documentation of births, deaths, and land ownership (land registry) in Greece only in recent years.

¹³ In Paraskevopoulos’s study in the late sixties with 62 adoptive families, 70% of the adopted children were born out of wedlock and 26% were “ektheta”(“abandoned”) children (Paraskevopoulos 1971, 15). The numbers presented by Kaloutsi-Tavlaridou (1970) are similar.

¹⁴ See the special volumes of *Dhíni* (1986) and *Skoupa* (1979), which portray women’s battles to change the family laws. According to the old Articles 304 and 305 of the Civil Code, abortions were illegal. Pregnant women as well as those who helped with the abortion, faced the threat of imprisonment. For abortion policies and practices, see Georges (1996).

¹⁵ I do not refer here to the practice of ψυχοπαιδιών (soul-children), a well-known practice, wherein a child from a poor family lived with another family and usually worked for them. The child maintained its relations with the family of origin, as opposed to legal adoption where the child lost all contact with the family of origin.

¹⁶ In her article, Areti Athanasiou mentions that among these 170 mothers, there were 2 graduates of tertiary education, 9 university students, 12 high-school graduates, 26 women who had attended some grades of primary education, while the rest of them had not attended school at all (Athanasiou, 1980).

¹⁷ Paraskevopoulos (1971) states the same about the nursery of Athens. Regarding the infant center “Mitera,” see Triseliotis & Kousidou, who mention that from 1974 to 1977, 160 children were born to single mothers. Of these 160 children, 118 were eventually adopted (1989, 246).

¹⁸ For a more detailed analysis on today’s birthmothers’ accounts see Papadaki (2017).

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